

Sabeel Conferences: Fuelling the Arab-Israeli Conflict October 8, 2007

North American Friends of Sabeel (FOS) will be holding its Boston [conference](#) on October 26-27, to "look at ways the South African apartheid model of ethnic/racial segregation is applied in Palestine today." Sabeel claims to "promote nonviolence, human rights, [and] international law..." and FOS states that the conference will feature "Palestinian and Israeli peacemakers."

NGO Monitor has documented Sabeel's virulent activities to demonize and delegitimize the State of Israel, including leadership of church divestment campaigns, use of anti-Semitic imagery and rejection of the "two-state solution." In addition to the well-known speakers (including Desmond Tutu, [John Dugard](#) - UN Special Rapporteur on the situation in the Palestinian Territories, and Noam Chomsky), this conference is merely another platform for Sabeel (and its NGO partner, the Israel Committee Against Home Demolitions - [ICAHD](#)) to advance a highly distorted narrative of the Arab-Israeli conflict that blames Israel for terrorism and ignores Palestinian corruption, and to wage political war against Israel

Background information

The Jerusalem-based Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center (website: [www.sabeel.org](#)) was founded in 1989, and is led by Palestinian Anglican, Naim Ateek. According to its mission statement, Sabeel is "an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians", which "encourages Christians from around the world to work for justice and to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people." Yet Sabeel is little-known among Israelis or Palestinians, and its record demonstrates its central goal is to undermine and demonize the State of Israel at international forums. Sabeel is not transparent about its sources of income, although it is a "local partner" of UK-based [Christian Aid](#), which is heavily subsidized by the [Irish](#) and [UK](#) governments.

Sabeel's support for a "one-state solution" (a euphemism for the destruction of Israel as a Jewish State)

Ateek reportedly stated that he has "come to the point of the reality—but not the right—of Israel's existence."¹ Such claims led the Simon Wiesenthal Center to [protest](#) the Episcopal Church's intention to grant Ateek a peace award in May 2006. The Center argued that "Ateek has repeatedly diminished, not enhanced, the cause of peace and justice in the Middle East."² Ateek regularly restates his opposition to Israel's existence: in a 2006 [meeting](#) with American Church and Jewish leaders and in [the Spring 2007 issue of Cornerstone](#) (Sabeel's quarterly publication).³

Sabeel's position frequently puts it at odds with other Christian denominations that do not share its anti-Israel ideology. Naim Ateek declared in 2004: "To embrace justice means to address the menace and heresy of Christian Zionism in our churches today.... The challenge to pastors and Bible teachers is to de-Zionize the Bible."⁴ Sabeel's rejection of the legitimacy of the State of Israel has drawn sharp criticism from other Christian Groups. The Rev. Tony Higton of the Anglican Church in Jerusalem criticized the Anglican Peace and Justice Network, of which Sabeel is a member, for its 2004 statement,⁵ which he called "biased and unjust." "The APJN statement loses credibility because it contains very inadequate references to terrorism and its effects, and no reference to the need of the Israelis to defend themselves [...] Furthermore, the church should recognize that the Palestinians experience economic disaster and lack of infrastructure, partly through corruption, injustice and oppression on the part of some of their own leaders."⁶

Use of anti-Semitic imagery

Naim Ateek employs anti-Semitic theological themes and imagery in his speeches and publications, as reflected in his [2001 Sabeel "Easter message"](#): "it seems to many of us that Jesus is on the cross again with thousands of crucified Palestinians around him. [...] The Israeli government crucifixion system is operating daily." In a [February 2001 sermon](#), Ateek intimated that Israel was responsible for the death of Jesus (the Palestinians) as infant, prophet and messiah: "Israel has placed a large boulder, a big stone that has metaphorically shut off the Palestinians in a tomb. It is similar to the stone placed on the entrance of Jesus' tomb..."⁷ In his book *Justice and Only Justice*, Ateek uses classical anti-Semitic distortions, comparing modern Jews, who "embrace violence, contrary to God's will," to their "immoral" ancestors. The book claims that Jews now repeat, with "exact precision," their ancestors' "murderous sins."⁸

¹ Source: [www.adl.org/PresRele/ChJew_31/4848_31.htm](#)

² See the Simon Wiesenthal official website: [www.wiesenthal.com](#)

³ Page 5 states: "*Might not a bi-national future in one state be one in which Palestinians and Israelis alike both sit securely under vine and fig tree?*"

⁴ Source: [www.ucc.org/synod/](#)

⁵ Source: [www.aco.org/apjn/APJN_Jersualem.pdf](#)

⁶ Source: [www.c4rpme.org/bin/articles.cgi?Cat=divestment&Subcat=anglican&ID=14](#)

⁷ Message available on Sabeel website: [http://www.sabeel.org/old/reports/easter01.htm](#)

⁸ Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, U.S.A., 1989. p.106.

Leading the divestment campaign

While Sabeel declares its opposition to all "violations of human rights" and claims to support "morally responsible investment (MRI)," it targets Israel alone for [divestment](#). Sabeel promotes MRI resolutions in Protestant churches in North America and Europe, implementing the NGO strategy agreed at the [2001 Durban conference](#) to use boycotts and divestment campaigns to de-legitimize Israel. Sabeel has been influential in motions adopted by the World Council of Churches, the Anglican Church, the Presbyterian Church (which reversed its decision in 2006), and others; many of these Church statements reflect and quote from Sabeel's publications. In the UK, [Rev. Stephen Sizer \(Vice Chair of Friends of Sabeel UK and the major proponent of replacement theology\)](#) has led the campaign to enforce the Church of England's Synod vote for divestment.

Partnerships with other radical NGOs and individuals

ICAHD (Israel Committee Against Home Demolitions, an NGO heavily funded by the EU) director Jeff Halper regularly appears alongside Ateek at FOS conferences. Together they claim to unite Jewish and Christian perspectives,⁹ thereby providing a façade of legitimacy to their distortions of international law and the manipulation of the language of human rights. In a presentation to the UN's International Conference on Civil Society in Support of the Palestinian People in September, 2003, Halper stated: "A Jewish state has proven politically, and in the end, morally, untenable." In 2005 Halper gave a speech claiming that "Israel's moves were all unilateral to create an illusion of a Palestinian state, but which would leave Israel in control;" and that "ninety-five percent of the cases of house demolitions had nothing to do with security," providing no source or evidence for his claims. Like Sabeel, ICHAD is a minor fringe group within Israel, and Halper concentrates on promoting his message of apartheid and demonization of Israel to international audiences.

Sabeel also frequently partners the [Mennonite Central Committee](#) (MCC), whose anti-Israel activities include campaigning against the Israeli security barrier while ignoring Palestinian terror, and disseminating the views of other radical anti-Israel NGOs, including [Al-Haq](#), [LAW](#) (Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment - a leading NGO at the Durban 2001 conference), and [al-Awda](#) (an NGO promoting the Palestinian 'right of return' and destruction of Israel).

Boston conference participant, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, is another major contributor to the Durban Strategy. In [a speech](#) at a 2002 Sabeel conference, Tutu repeatedly labeled Israel an "apartheid state," and compared the Israeli government to Stalin and Hitler.¹⁰ Following criticism of Tutu's anti-Semitic and anti-Israel statements, the University of St. Thomas (Minneapolis-St. Paul) revoked his invitation to their spring 2008 conference.¹¹

Recent Sabeel activities

- **Meeting with Ahmadinejad**

Sabeel representatives attended a [September 26, 2007 meeting](#) in New York with Iranian President Ahmadinejad, organized by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Their attendance sparked an outcry from Jewish and Christian groups who boycotted the meeting in protest of Ahmadinejad's calls for Israel's destruction.¹² Participants, including Sabeel, acquiesced to Iranian officials' insistence that representatives of the Baha'i faith be denied access to the meeting.¹³

- **One-sided, inaccurate criticism of Israel in 2006 Lebanon War**

[Sabeel issued a press release on August 2, 2006](#) which condemned Israel's "vengeance" in Lebanon, and attributed the war to the establishment of Israel in 1948, and the "occupation" by Israel and America of "other people's land" in the Middle East. The statement declares that in "the massacre in the village of Qana in the south of Lebanon on July 30th...over 60 people were killed," labeling it a "crime against humanity". The [figures provided by the Red Cross on July 30](#) stated that 28 people had been killed but Sabeel has not corrected this error.

- **Criticism of Israel on 40th anniversary of 1967 War**

On June 13, 2007, [Sabeel](#) issued a [press release](#) to mark the 40th anniversary of the 1967 War, stating that, "the brutal assault on Gaza continues unabated. Israel's army daily invades communities and kidnaps and kills Palestinians in the West Bank." Sabeel ignores Palestinian terror and corruption, and states: "The reasons for the current feelings are clear. The Israeli government and the Israeli army are implementing a long term strategy to destroy the infrastructure of the Palestinian government, economy, and civil society." Christians for a Fair Witness on the Middle East were "[appalled](#)" by this statement, and condemned Sabeel's revisionist account of the 1967 War, its disregard of Israeli efforts to engage in peace talks and its omission of on-going Palestinian rocket attacks against Israeli civilians.

⁹ At the 2006 Sabeel Kansas City Conference, Halper stated: "I'm not the Christian part [of the program], I'm the Jewish part.....I'm the Israeli part."

¹⁰ In the speech Tutu stated: "... Hitler was powerful. Mussolini was powerful. Stalin was powerful. Idi Amin was powerful. Pinochet was powerful. The Apartheid government were powerful. Milosevic was powerful. But, this is God's world. An unjust Israeli government, however powerful, will fall in the world of this kind of God."

¹¹ As reported in *Minneapolis/St. Paul City Pages*, Oct. 3, 2007, and in a *Minneapolis Public Radio report*: <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2007/10/04/notutu/>

¹² On October 27, 2005, Ahmadinejad declared: "As the Imam said, Israel must be wiped off the map." (Source: www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,12858,1601413,00.html)

¹³ Source: CAMERA Online report, Sept. 28, 2007: www.camera.org/index.asp?x_context=2&x_outlet=118&x_article=1377